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WHAT WE OWE TO GREECE

By PROFESSOR PERCY GARDNER of Oxford University

HUMANISM AND MEASURE

WE are all in these days believers in evolution, alike in the history of the physical world, and in the history of mankind. But we have to acknowledge that evolution does not proceed at an even pace; that there are periods and countries in which during whole centuries we find only stagnation or even retrogression; and other times in which the rate of evolution is suddenly accelerated and the whole race or society moves on to new level, making in a few decades the progress which normally might seem to demand centuries.

Of all these times of quickened and overflowing life, the most remarkable in the ancient world was the sixth century B. C. There was a sudden quickening of the human pulse, a rapid rise to a higher stage, especially in southern Europe but also in the East. This is impressed upon every reader of Herodotos; and it is confirmed by researches of which Herodotos knew nothing. In the near East we have the rise of the civilizing Persian empire, the return of the Jews to their own land, the prophecies of Isaiah. In the far East, Buddhism was taking its rise in India and the wisdom of China was being formulated by the great Confucius.

But the flower of this world change was the rise of Greek civilization. If a visitor from another planet had come to the lands bordering the Ægean Sea in the middle of the seventh century B. C. he would have found civilization concentrated in the old world empires of Egypt and Babylon with their immemorial conservatism. Greek Colonies were rising on the shores of the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, but they were small, little more than trading stations. If our visitor had returned a century later, he would have been astounded. From Italy on the West to Asia Minor on the East the Greeks were everywhere rising into a new life, breaking through the crust of tradition, producing works of art and poetry such as the world had not seen. The art of writing was coming into general use, coinage had been invented, commerce was developing. Great temples with rich sculpture were rising at Ephesus, Miletos, Delphi, Athens. Pottery was no longer adorned merely with decorative patterns, but painted with scenes from mythology and heroic legend. The drama was arising in Sicily and Attica. The great Ionian school of philosophy was beginning to discuss the nature of the world and man. Lyric poets, Sappho, Anakreon and the rest were pouring out their burning verses. The Olympic and Delian festivals were developing into splendid occasions for pomp and song.

And only a century later we have the age of Perikles and the Parthenon. The plays of Aischylos and Sophokles were being performed on the stage at Athens. The great pictures of Polygnotos and the sculptural masterpieces of Myron and Polykleitos, some of which are still our great instructors, adorned the temples and the market-places. Sokrates was beginning to fascinate the youth of Athens; Herodotos was reading aloud his history to en-

tranced audiences; Olympia, Athens, Delphi had become great repertoires of historic inscriptions and museums of art.

PERIOD OF THE RENASCENCE

The only age of more modern times which can be set beside the early age of Greece as a time of the awakening of taste and intellect, of thought and poetry is the time of the Renaissance, when the literature and art of the ancient world came once more to the light of heaven, and a magnificent day-break arose upon the dark ages of the suppression of intelligence and the hard domination of the organized Church. But the Renaissance, however splendid, was but a revival of the long-forgotten glories of Greece, as the Reformation was but a return, or at least an attempt to return, to the freshness of early Christianity.

Such is the historic sequence. In one century a complete change in what may be called the focus of civilization, the rapid moving in a few bright spots on the world's surface towards the development of a brilliant civilization. And in the next century the rise of a few dwellers in the great cities of Greece to an intellectual, artistic and even ethical level, which has rarely if ever been attained by groups of men since. In science, in mechanical invention, in width of outlook, in experience of the world, the modern people are infinitely above those of the ancient world; but are they superior to the Greeks in taste, in charm, in wisdom?

LOVE OF BEAUTY, LOVE OF MEASURE

My purpose is to sketch, so far as it can be done in a few pages, the particular features of Greek civilization, which made it what it became in relation to the past and the future. The three qualities which I would select as especially marking all the productions of the Greek genius are *humanism*, *love of beauty* and *love of measure*.

Humanism comes first in order of importance. The great empires of the East had acquired vast power and wealth, they had built great cities and palaces, they had established social discipline, they were devoted to the worship of the gods; but there was one thing which they had not grasped—the beauty and charm of humanity. On the walls of Assyrian palaces we see representations of battles and sieges, endless trains of captives; we see the king hunting in his parks; we see deities, partly human and partly animal, receiving worship and gifts. On the walls of Egyptian temples it is the cultus of the gods with all its ceremonies, and the judgment of souls at death which especially impress us. The Greeks brought art down from the level of divine cultus and the prowess of kings, not indeed to the level of ordinary humanity—that was yet to come—but to scenes of human pathos, the victory of civilization over barbarism, presumption in the presence of the gods and its punishment, crime and remorse, love and hatred. It loved to depict the labors of divinely inspired heroes in the service of

mankind, the prowess of athletes, the beauty of highly trained young men and the loveliness of women, scenes of farewell on the brink of the grave, feasting and dancing and the joy of life. When the Roman poet wrote "I am a man, nothing human can be alien to me" he was but echoing, as the Roman writers do, a Greek feeling.

When Sokrates turned away the attention of thinking men from investigations of the phenomena of nature, which have but a superficial effect on life and happiness, to the study of humanity itself and the deeper sources of life, which are not poured in from without but which arise from within, he established for all time the pursuit of moral good and reasonable happiness as the chief object of a wise man's search.

NIHILISM IN ART

Humanism we have always with us; but there is humanism of various kinds. The study of man and the love of what is human may take nobler and baser forms. There is a kind of naturalism only too familiar to the modern world which puts all manifestations of human energy and life on the same level, which discards the notion of better and worse, and regards the portrayal of what is ugly and base as equally attractive with the depiction of what is noble and beautiful. There is a kind of nihilism abroad which tries to free art from ethical and æsthetic considerations, until artists choose by preference to portray bodies distorted by vice and bad habits, putrified corpses, abominable deeds. At the opposite pole to this morbid naturalism is the bright idealism of the Greeks, who took no pleasure in anything distorted or diseased, not even to the extent of parodying it. It was life, not death, for which it panted, more life and fuller that it ensued. The free exercise of mind and body, forms made beautiful by rigorous training or full of natural charm, attracted the brush and the chisel.

One cannot, of course, deny, especially when one looks from the Christian point of view, that an art of healthy naturalism is necessarily limited and must often fail to render the higher strivings of mankind. The worn and lean frame of an ascetic, burned out by the fire of an inward aspiration, or a body hardened and deformed by incessant physical toil, would not attract the Greek artist, though in the later age of Greece we do find wonderful studies of shepherds or old women who are dilapidated by time. To me, however, it seems that such subjects are more appropriate to the art of painting, which can more freely deal with the transitory, than to sculpture, which has in it the element of permanence, and stereotypes all that it portrays. To sculpture which has the quality of charm we recur again and again, and are delighted to have it near us: but sculpture which portrays ugly forms, however it may interest and impress us at first sight, becomes by degrees an incubus, if we see it again and again. If we cease to care for a picture, we need not look at it again: but a statue forces itself upon us by the mere occupation of space; and every defect in it becomes clearer to us day by day.

GREEK BALANCE AND PROPORTION

I have set down as one of the governing conditions of Greek art the love of balance and measure; and

certainly to the modern eye and mind this is one of its most marked characteristics. The pediment of a temple is a noteworthy example. Many modern sculptors have tried to fill the triangular tympanum of a gable with figures; but I am not aware that any of them has won a real success. But to the Greek artist no conditions for the exercise of his art could be more suitable. The main interest of the subject naturally centered in a set of figures, three or five in number, under the peak of the gable; and on either side, figure balancing figure, gods or heroes or men approached or receded from the central group, their poses adapted to the space at command, which grew narrower and narrower as one approached the corners; these could only be filled by recumbent figures.

But to the Greek artist these fixed spacial conditions, which to the modern artist often seem merely irksome and difficult, were grateful restraints, suggesting a pleasing treatment of a well known theme. It was in sculpture as it was and still is in poetry. Except the rhyme, nearly all the forms of poetry were devised by the Greeks, and without them poetry would be like a diamond uncut and rough. But every one who has tried a match with the Muses knows that the stricter the form in poetry, the easier it is to produce pleasing verse. To succeed in what has been called the fatal facility of blank verse is scarcely possible except to a Milton or a Wordsworth; But thousands of people can write a tolerable sonnet.

Certainly balance and proportion were preserved in all the productions of Greek art to a degree which the modern eye only by degrees recognizes: not only in sculpture and vase painting but in all branches of art. What could be more symmetrical than a tragedy of Sophokles, with chorus interposed at intervals to separate the groups of dialogue, and the chorus divided into strophe and anti-strophe? The rhythmic dance which the chorus performed in front of the stage, to emphasize the action of the play, fitted in perfectly with that action and with the words and music which accompanied it, while the forms of the actors in the background moved in such quiet and ordered fashion that their groups might well seem a series of sculptured reliefs. Even the works of the great historians Herodotos and Thukydides are ordered in the fashion of a tragedy, the events moving on with ebb and flow toward a terrible tragedy, the collapse of the Persian invasion of Greece, or the destruction of the Athenian army at Syracuse.

GREEKS BEFORE THE GREEKS

The brilliant discoveries of Dr. Schliemann and Sir Arthur Evans in Argolis and in Crete have made it clear that in the second millennium B. C. there dwelt in Greek lands a non-Greek race, cultivated and pleasure-loving, devoted to religious pomps and athletic sports, and capable of producing works in metal and pottery which reach a high level of merit in the art of decoration. We may even find in some of their representations of such scenes as battles and lion-hunts more promise of humanism, more sense of the pathetic than we can trace in the more highly developed productions of the great empires of the East. But they had not yet started on the road which leads to high art,

because their productions were spasmodic, unbalanced, wanting in rhythm.

It was the coming in of the Hellenes from the north, which, as it were, crystallized this diffused sense of art into definite forms. The Hellenes and Dorians were simple in manners and backward in outward civilization compared with the race which built the palace at Knossos and the lion-gate of Mykenai; and for centuries the visible surroundings of the combined peoples seemed to become more barbarous. But the invading race had precisely that love of measure, that self-restraint and purposeful will which was needed to develop out of a chaos and cosmos what we call civilization. They worked not loosely and at random, but in regular ways, ways not indeed

consciously thought out but developed from within by the innate genius of the race. And so the Greeks set out, not like their predecessors on roads which led in a circle, but in a direction which moved toward a new and a higher world. "Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control—these three alone lead life to sovereign power."

Thus humanism had to be infused with the love of beauty, and both had to be guided and restrained by law and a sense of order before the Greece could be formed which to every man of sensibility and education seems the mother of his spirit and the directress of his thought, though her influence may often come into his life not directly but through modern channels.

Percy Gardner

VICTORY

They picture her as all a-wing, her hands
Outstretched to take the laurels and her face
Upturned in triumph; she has won the race:
Eager, alight, erect and proud she stands. . . .

Ah, Victory! Time has dropped his silver sands
Till all these likenesses have nobly changed,
And some day there shall be your symbol ranged:
A later likeness, for our younger strands.—

A woman with a quiet strength and poise
Standing alone, looking not up, not down
Upon the World she holds within still palms:

A trust upon her face which naught alloys,
With quiet brows that never knew a frown
And lips a-smile, as though she breathed an alms.

Marie Welch

